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LITERACIES

Remember when literacy was reading and writing? Remember when we thought that it was simple? It turns out that we were wrong. Perhaps our traditional assumptions of literacy were not just simple but maybe even simplistic. The world has changed. Schools have changed. Students have changed. Now we are coming to know multiple types of literacies: *functional* (languages of the streets and of life), *academic* (languages of schools and universities), *workplace* (languages of our jobs), *information* (languages of technology), *constructive* (languages we construct with the printed word), *emergent* (languages constructed with the text before we are really decoding), *cultural* (language that reflects the perspective of one culture—guess which one), *critical* (languages that take us deeper into more complex understandings of the word and the world), *financial* (language to enable students to handle their money more responsibly), and, finally, *literacies* as a new type of literacy that provides a foundation that is reflective of multiple experiences. Literacies are reading, writing, and reflecting. Literacies help us to make sense of our world and to do something about it.

I should have known that literacy would be more complex than my traditional assumptions. I have watched many students develop (and not develop) their literacies in multiple ways. These kids have forced me to expand my understandings of literacy to be far more inclusive of all types of literacies.

All of these literate processes have one common characteristic: They are derived from social practices. Literacies are socially constructed, often with our friends, in specific contexts, for specific purposes. Literacies do not develop in isolation; rather, literate processes grow from families, from schools, from work, from cultures, from knowledges, from technologies, and so on.

If the new and more complex meanings of literacies begin to slip away from you, go back to the section about discourses and start again. It is a very similar concept. Debe was one to frolic in and relish every level, every facet, every dimension, every implication of the literacies of statistics. On the other hand, my literacy in that world could never have been considered plural; it was barely singular, which reflects my tiny understanding of statistics. Do not be fooled into thinking that the term *literacies* is just specific vocabulary for one particular context. It is not. It is the underlying ways of knowing, thinking, and making complex meanings. Each of us brings our own world when learning to read the word and reread the world. I thank Jim Cummins (1998) for reminding me of Moffett's critical definition of literacy:

Literacy is dangerous and has always been so regarded. It naturally breaks down barriers of time, space, and culture. It threatens one's original identity by broadening it through vicarious experiencing and the incorporation of somebody else's heart and ethos. So we feel profoundly ambiguous about literacy. Looking at it as a means of transmitting our culture to our children, we give it priority in education, but recognizing the threat of its backfiring, we make it so tiresome and personally unrewarding that youngsters won't want to do it on their own, which is, of course, when it becomes dangerous. . . . The net effect of this ambivalence is to give literacy with one hand and take it back with the other, in keeping with our contradictory wish for youngsters to learn to think but only about what we already have in mind for them. (Moffett, 1989, p. 85)

Critical Literacy: Reading the Word and the World

Yes, *critical literacy* is reading and writing, but it is much, much more. Critical literacy involves knowing, lots of knowing. It also involves seeing, lots of seeing. It enables us to read the social practices of the world all too clearly. Critical literacy can push us into the zone of "all this learning really isn't so great." Critical literacy means that we understand how and why knowledge and power are constructed by whom and for whom.³

Critical literacy is linked with liberty (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2002). Critical literacy builds on the students' languages and provides them with the ability to be in control of all the words they need (Searle, 1998).

Reading the word means:

To decode/encode those words

To bring ourselves to those pages

To make meaning of those pages as they relate to our experiences, our possibilities, our cultures, and our knowledges

Reading the world means:

To decode/encode the people around us

To decode/encode the community that surrounds us

To decode/encode the visible and invisible messages of the world

Sandretto (2006) of New Zealand captures the notion of critical literacy well as she builds on Lankshear's (1994) no-more-take-for-granted-text. Sandretto and colleagues encourage teachers to understand that any text is socially constructed, and, therefore, text can never be neutral. Not mine. Not yours. If we can help students and teachers understand that anything socially constructed, can also be deconstructed; and anything written, can be rewritten. They summarize their understandings of critical literacy by saying that we can create classroom practices anytime that we help students understand

- texts are social constructions
- texts are not neutral
- authors draw upon particular discourses (often majority discourses) and assume that readers
- will be able to draw upon them as well
- authors make certain conscious and unconscious choices when constructing texts

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- all texts have gaps, or silences, and particular representations within them
 - texts have consequence for how we make sense of ourselves, others, and the world
- (Sandretto & colleagues, 2006).

Thus, critical literacy is teaching so that we come to understand ourselves, others, and the world more deeply.

Traditionally, literacy has been reading the word (to paraphrase Freire and Macedo's title), or decoding sounds and letters. Critical literacy is reading the world, or encoding the power structures and our role in these processes (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Critical literacy recognizes that reading does not take place in a vacuum; it includes the entire social, cultural, political, and historical context.⁴ In what follows, I introduce you to a variety of people who have sadly read the world.

Many five-year-olds do this before they ever enter school. From TV, from their family, from trips to the store, they understand power. They read who speaks and who listens, where, when, and to whom.

Five-year-old José and his family nervously entered the school for the first time. They found the office and entered to begin the enrollment process. The secretary greeted them in English and handed them a packet of papers, all of which were written only in English.

"Fill out these papers, please," she said to José and his family. As they looked nervously at the papers, Jane, the secretary, walked around the counter, took José by the hand, and walked out into the hallway. En route to a kindergarten class, she was joined by two teachers.

"Whose class will he be in?" one of them asked.

"Put him in Special Ed. He's from Mexico; he doesn't know anything," the other replied.

Defeated and with his head down, José entered the classroom.

José cannot yet read the word, but he has read the world very clearly. José started school the same day as Carmen, his teacher. Together, Carmen and José taught me many things, including the meaning of critical literacy. It was not long before José was engaged actively in reading and learning with Carmen in her classroom.

Orate and Literate Communities

We in North America put much faith in literate communities. We place high status on literacy, or reading and writing. Status and prestige are not assigned to those who are *illiterate*, a word that carries heavy connotations of *less*. *Illiteracy* has become a loaded, value-laden concept that is used to deny access to power. For example, when we say, "They are illiterate," we often mean much more than merely not being able to decode. However, this is not true in much of the world (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1993). Many people in the world carry their knowledge in their heads and not on paper. Important people carry important knowledge in their heads. Instead of being literate communities, these are called *orate communities*.

The most vivid example of orate knowledge is a mariachi guitar player I knew. He carried the entire history of the Mexican revolution in his head, and he could sing and play it. After taking lessons from him, I learned the difference between orate and literate communities. I now have boxes and boxes of Mexican music with all the verses that I have transcribed from the tapes I made of him singing. These boxes are dusty and in my garage. His orate knowledge is still in his head and can be retrieved at a moment's notice.

So much of our knowledge serves us better when we carry it in our heads and not on paper. For example, when I am in the grocery store or on a plane and people ask me questions about education, multilingual education, or critical literacy, they don't want me to get out my papers, my books, and my transparencies and answer their questions. They just want me to tell them in plain language something that is understandable.

If you are a teacher, there is a fun way to learn about orate and literate communities with your students. Start your class by explaining that for today, the time will be spent doing a big review of all that has been learned. Tell your students that they will need a blank piece of paper.

Watch carefully what they do; they will immediately begin looking for papers with notes, for books, for old journals—anyplace where the knowledge is contained. Tell them, "No, no, no. Use your brain; just brains, no books, no notes, no charts, no index cards. Just brains." Just orate literacy. Begin your review with some leading questions of what has been studied. You and the students will learn together that much of our knowledge is not carried in our heads; it's in our books, and we only access it—we don't know it. I suspect that there is a lot we could learn from orate people who are often referred to as *illiterates*.